



AAC Publications

Ski Seasons: Modern Ski Alpinism in the Alaska Range

Alaska, Central Alaska Range

LIKE MANY questionable ideas, the idea of traversing the Alaska Range originated in extreme boredom. In 2018, Michael Gardner and I showed up in Alaska to one of the bleakest forecasts I have ever seen. For 12 days, rain poured down in Talkeetna, followed by a brief stretch of “decent” weather during which we flew in to Kahiltna Base Camp to help our friend Lisa Roderick, the camp manager, set up for the season. We hoped to do a bit of climbing afterward, but the window slammed shut, and for the next several days we were tent-bound, which allowed us to focus on our strength: talking endless amounts of shit.

At some point, amid a long stream of sophisticated jokes and intellectual discussion, came a question seemingly so pointless, it may never have been asked: “Which do you think would be harder? Climbing the Infinite Spur on Sultana’s south side in ski boots or skiing down the north side in climbing boots?” A vigorous debate ensued, not to be resolved at that time and place, but the seed had been planted: Someday, we hoped, we would start on the south side of an Alaska Range peak, climb a technical route, ski down the north side, and exit across the tundra.

The history of the Alaska Range is rich in adventure, with epic tales of storms, survival, and the unknown. Early climbers operated without the convenience of airplanes, and even some present-day expeditions (especially on the north side of the range) still walk, ski, or float in or out of the mountains. Our discussions were driven by a desire to play a part in this history, and to quiet the nagging voices in the back of our minds that said we hadn’t been approaching the range with the same creativity and adventurous spirit as those who came before us.

That year, we weren’t equipped to try a traverse, and when the weather finally cleared, we instead looked for adventure on the south face of Denali (AAJ 2019). However, when we got home, the idea wouldn’t leave my mind. Would it be possible? Should I spend the whole winter skiing at Bridger Bowl in my climbing boots and Silvretta bindings? We spent the winter dreaming of spring in Alaska.

I’d like to say that all that time made us better organized, but although Michael and I purchased light ski boots and skinny skis, and even practiced climbing with them a bit, when the time came to head for Sultana (Mt. Foraker) in early June, we were still scrambling around base camp and trying to find crampon bails that would fit our boots. Once we were fully equipped (thanks to the efforts of friends Frank Preston and Adam Fabrikant), we left camp at midnight for the Infinite Spur. Forty-eight hours later, we were back. In between was a blur of wild adventure, made even more so by snowy conditions, a weak refreeze, and our lack of research about the route.

Originally our dream had been to exit the range to the north via packraft, but thankfully we were talked out of that idea by those who know the area better than we do—rather than the blissful paddle we were hoping to find, the area north of Sultana resembles a massive swamp filled with mosquitoes and grizzly bears. Visions of walking through knee-deep murky water and dragging a raft convinced us instead to opt for skiing at top speed down Sultana’s moderate northeast ridge—quite a good time, but the full traverse had eluded us. It did, however, make for an excellent test of our lightweight ski gear on a proper alpine route.

The COVID interlude of 2020 meant no Denali season. This period of forced distance from Alaska did have one positive, however. With perspective, we realized that our experience on Sultana was not just

a novelty—it was in certain instances the best way to approach a climb. For example, the Infinite Spur's sheer isolation often makes getting to and from the technical climbing the crux of the whole experience. In the past, teams have either done shuttles of their skis or chosen the ethically dubious route of tossing gear in a crevasse so they didn't have to retrieve it after descending the mountain far from the start of the climb. Additionally, Sultana's descent is notoriously complex and threatened by crevasse hazard—skis make it safer, faster, and way more fun.

We were able to identify numerous other objectives, both in Alaska and closer to home, that made perfect sense to approach in this "skimo" style. We'd also discovered that it really completes the experience. Rather than the descent being a tedious affair, it can be just as challenging and enjoyable as the ascent.

WHEN MICHAEL and I met in Talkeetna in April 2021, the sky was blue and had been for almost two weeks. Conditions were perfect, but, unfortunately, barely 48 hours remained of this historic weather window. Picking the right objective for the right conditions is an art, and one at which I frequently fail, but this time we knew exactly where to go. The Isis Face, which lies on an obscure aspect of Denali's South Buttress, was first climbed by our friend Jack Tackle and Dave Stutzman in 1982. It has received only three repeats, and no one had ventured onto the face since 2005.

In 2015, I had spent several days staring at this face, along with Willis Brown and Seth Timpano, during our first ascent of the west face of Reality Peak (AAJ 2016). From this vantage, we could study an amazing looking unclimbed line to the right of the original route. In fact, this new line had been our primary objective that trip, but the weather did not allow for such a committing route. In subsequent years, Seth and I, as well as Michael and I, had this line on the top of our list, but again—weather. A large part of its challenge lies in the convoluted descent, which is time consuming and requires good visibility to be done safely, so we figured skis would be great to have along.

By this time, we had fully figured out our kit: a standard alpine climbing rack and bivy kit, plus skimo race skis and skins (162 cm, 60 cm underfoot, and 790 grams per ski); Scarpa Alien RS boots, which at 910 grams per boot are actually lighter than double mountaineering boots; and lightweight, durable, fixed-length poles. This equipment, we found, didn't actually change our climbing ability dramatically. Aside from the added weight, which definitely slows you down a bit, we found the main challenge to be remembering we had skis on our backs—occasionally, we'd accidentally whack each other in the head at belay stations. Our feet would get wet from snow coming over the cuff of the ski boots, but in Alaska, where there's extensive sun during climbing season, we were able to manage that.

Paul Roderick of Talkeetna Air Taxi dropped us off on the West Fork of the Ruth Glacier early on the morning on April 27, under clear blue skies, remarking that we both looked pretty "Euro," which we took as a good sign. The snowpack on the glacier had developed a stout crust, a testament to the warmth of the long early season window. We took full advantage and cruised over to the base of the wall in a little over an hour. The lower route took a convoluted and serac-threatened path up a pocket glacier, giving it a classic mountaineering feel before the technical climbing began. After a couple of dicey bridge crossings, we found ourselves at the base of the opening runnel, which lured us in with 60 meters of fun, mellow ice. Soon enough, though, the angle reared up, and several pitches of proper climbing ensued: sustained but never desperate, with wide stemming around overhanging ice on perfect rock holds—these pitches were of the highest quality!

The middle of the route was more moderate, and several long simul blocks of wild flutings and snow climbing, inter-spersed with a short mixed section, brought us to the final headwall. It was getting dark, but we thought we were nearing the original line on the Isis Face—a deep chimney led invitingly upward. As it turned out, the original line went up moderate ramps farther to the left, and Michael soon was met with several lengthy leads on steep ice. I was happy to recharge for a couple pitches, but my peaceful stargazing at the belay was frequently interrupted by Michael's curses as his skis wedged in the narrow slot. Thankfully, the difficulties eased after a couple pitches, and I took the lead once again through moderate mixed climbing, finally finding a piton that reassured us we'd joined

the original route and the end was near.

The rock band eased off into steep snow, and we pulled onto flat ground at 15,400 feet and crawled into our tent to rewarm our toes. The next morning, we lay shivering under our single sleeping bag, wondering where the sun was. As it turns out, if we'd set up our tent 20 meters further south, we would have been basking in warm sunshine all morning—classic!

The ski down left a little to be desired, with lots of blue ice, rappelling, and straight-lining under seracs, as we followed the South Buttress down to Margaret Pass, and from there took a pocket glacier down to the East Fork of the Kahiltna. Everything went smoothly, though, and a little over five hours after leaving our bivouac, we were cruising up Heartbreak Hill, feeling very psyched. We called the route Anubis (2,500m, WI5 M6), after the Egyptian god of the underworld, as a complement to the original Isis.

UPON ARRIVING at base camp, we were happy to find an assortment of friends from across the country. Two days of rest seemed like barely enough, but a vague sort of weather window seemed to be on the horizon. We decided to take a lap up the classic Bibler-Klewin route on the north buttress of Begguya (Mt. Hunter). Our goal was the summit, so we carried a tent and some extra food, to wait out the cold night of early May. Thirteen hours after crossing the bergschrund, we set up our tent on top of the buttress in somewhat miserable conditions, which thankfully eased a bit by the morning. Typically, lenticular clouds on Foraker and Denali have us rappelling at top speed, but these had been hanging over our heads for days without anything more sinister happening, so we headed up. The strong winds made for scoured surfaces and easy trail breaking, and before we knew it we were on top. A quick walk and a couple of dozen rappels later, and we were back in camp for dinner. It started snowing the next day, delaying our flights out, and I almost missed meeting my clients in town for work.

While we guided trips on the West Buttress, the weather continued to be unsettled, but after eight days at 17,000 feet, I summited with a great group. Michael topped out the next day, and, feeling sufficiently acclimatized, we both headed down. After two days of “recovery” in the Fairview Inn, we weren't feeling all that sporty, but the weather coming up looked perhaps just stable enough for a bigger challenge on Denali.

Scarcely 48 hours after finishing our guided trips, we were back in the range and camped at the base of the south face. But then dark clouds rolled over the ridgeline and it began to snow heavily. It quickly became clear that we were going to have a tough go of simply navigating back to base camp, let alone moving in an upward direction, and we skied blindly back to camp in what was disturbingly close to rain. This unpleasant weather kept up for the better part of a week, which allowed us to recharge with the help of generous portions of Mountain Dew and corn dogs.

AS THE WEATHER improved, we were joined by our friend Adam Fabrikant, whose partners for various ski objectives had been unable to make it. Given the snowy conditions, Michael and I had abandoned our plans for a more technical objective, and the three of us packed skis along with our climbing gear. It seemed like it might be the perfect time for our old idea of traversing the range from south to north.

As an aside, this traverse was not entirely of our own design: Many others have had similar adventures, combining routes in creative ways, which definitely influenced us. To name a few, our friend Tyler Jones completed a Cassin Ridge to Muldrow traverse on foot with Kiel Hillman in 2005. A Japanese team, supported by a film crew and reportedly wearing traditional alpine ski boots (!!), climbed the Cassin and skied the West Rib in 2018. Peter Dale and Aaron Mainer have been quietly doing the raddest ski mountaineering in the range over the last several years, including a top-down, alpine-style ski descent of the Wickersham Wall in 2019. And finally, much like Newton and Leibniz independently inventing calculus—but far less useful—our friend Chantel Astorga decided to use a skimo technique to approach and descend from her solo attempt on the Cassin, which she soon

cruised (see story on p.50).

Our original plan for a new traverse was to climb the Cassin on the south face to the main summit, traverse to Denali's North Peak, and ski down the Pioneer Ridge and out the Muldrow Glacier to Wonder Lake. However, the glacial surge of 2021 had rendered the Muldrow an impassable maze of crevasses. As an alternative descent, Adam suggested the Northwest Buttress of Denali's North Peak, which drops around 10,000 feet from the summit to the upper Peters Glacier near Kahiltna Pass. First climbed in 1954, this route is rarely ascended but, according to one trusted source, was "probably" skiable. Although we had only Google Earth images and one crappy photo to go off, the plan was set. Once the sky cleared and the glacier refroze, we set off as team of three. To improve our motivation to continue to the tundra, we had all of our other gear immediately flown out from base camp.

We hoped the full traverse would take less than three days, and we planned just one bivy, on the Hanging Glacier at about 14,000 feet, which would allow us to rest a bit and set us up to arrive on the North Peak in the afternoon to catch perfect light for the ski down. We did not have sleeping bags, but instead carried puffy pants, a tent, and a stove. In "fast and light" style, we brought a tent with a bug net, thinking it could literally be a life saver when we arrived on the tundra!

None of us had done the Cassin before, and it exceeded our expectations for high-quality climbing. Because Adam is not as comfortable on technical terrain, we occasionally would fix our 6mm static rope for him on the tricky sections. The leader would solo, then the second would fix the rope while the leader continued to break trail. In this way, we were able to climb at an efficient pace despite being a team of three, and despite knee-to thigh-deep snow below 17,000 feet. We set the tent up twice, bivying for nine hours on the Hanging Glacier and resting for about five hours at 18,000 feet, which allowed us to stay reasonably fresh for the entire climb. Arriving at the summit 36 hours after leaving base camp, in amazing windless weather, we were optimistic about our chances for good conditions on the descent. The quick ski down to Denali Pass was the social part of the trip—we passed numerous teams heading up on this perfect day, and were psyched to catch our friends Colby and Eric at Denali Pass. Their stoke for our adventure recharged our batteries, and we slogged up to the North Peak in about three hours. It was so calm on top that Michael and I took off our boots to dry our feet.

Around 6 p.m., we started down the Northwest Buttress. The skiing began as ice and sastrugi, but soon the snow began to get deeper, and it's hard to imagine having better conditions. Good visibility much of the way made the route-finding easier than expected, and we were able to ski continuously for most of the ridge. It felt very exciting to descend farther and farther into unknown, especially when a convection cloud and white-out conditions coincided with the trickiest skiing on the route, with thin coverage over blue ice that forced us to transition to crampons several times. We arrived on the Peters Glacier elated—the roughly 10,000-foot descent had taken only around five hours. Now, it was time to switch gears again and make tracks for Wonder Lake, more than 30 miles away.

The trip down the Peters was indescribably beautiful. In around 15 hours, we skied, walked, and waded our way from high alpine terrain to a dry glacier and finally through piles of morainal rubble to gain the seemingly endless tundra. A decade of staring at green grass dotted with countless lakes from up high on Denali had filled me with a romantic notion of what it would be like to experience this landscape, and although the blazing sun, swampy ground, and relentless mosquitoes quickly brought me back to reality, the experience was everything I could have hoped for. Sixty-four hours after leaving base camp, most of it spent awake, we arrived at the road just minutes before the last shuttle bus of the day departed. We were all spent, but I felt completely content. We had completed our objective in our preferred style, together as a team. Although nothing can compare to the early days of adventure in Alaska Range, I fell asleep confident that we were giving it our best shot.

The ski alpinism we've done on Sultana and Denali, along with many other people's trips, like those mentioned above, make me think that the future of mountaineering in the Alaska Range is bright. By combining skills in different disciplines, future adventure-seekers will find ever more creative ways to

experience this special range. The only limits are our imaginations.

Summary: First ascent of Anubis (2,500m, WI5 M6) on the Isis Face of Denali's South Buttress, by Michael Gardner and Sam Hennessey, April 27–28, 2021. South-to-north traverse of Denali, combining the Cassin Ridge and the first ski descent of the Northwest Ridge (North Peak to the Peters Glacier), with an exit to Wonder Lake, by Gardner, Hennessey, and Adam Fabrikant, June 12–14, 2021. The traverse covered a horizontal distance of approximately 50 miles.

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Images



Michael Gardner astride the Infinite Spur on the south face of Sultana (Mt. Foraker). After this ski-climb-ski adventure in 2019, the author says, "We were able to identify numerous other objectives, both in Alaska and closer to home, that made perfect sense to approach in this 'skimo' style."



View to the northeast over Sultana and Denali. [Blue Line] Infinite Spur on (A) Sultana/Foraker, via clockwise loop from Kahiltna Base Camp (BC). [Yellow Line] First ascent of Anubis on Denali's South Buttress (B), approached from West Fork of Ruth Glacier, with descent to East Fork of the Kahiltna. [Red Line] South-to north traverse of Denali (C) via Cassin Ridge on the south face, traverse to North Peak, and first ski descent of the Northwest Buttress (D), exiting via the Peters Glacier to Wonder Lake (E). (W) marks 14 Camp on Denali's West Buttress.



The Isis Face, which tops out at 15,400 feet on the South Buttress of Denali. (1) Isis (Stutzman-Tackle, 1982). (2) Anubis (Gardner-Hennessey, 2021).



Steep mixed ground with skis on the pack on Anubis.



Climbing the Cassin Ridge during the first stage of the south-to-north traverse of Denali.



Sam Hennessey, Michael Gardner, and Adam Fabrikant on the summit of Denali after climbing the Cassin Ridge.



Sam Hennessey pauses during the 10,000-vertical-foot first descent of the Northwest Buttress of Denali. The Peters Glacier is hidden by the clouds, far below.



Descending the Northwest Buttress of Denali toward the Peters Glacier.



Denali's North Peak from slopes above the Peters Glacier. The upper Northwest Buttress generally follows the right skyline. During their 10,000-foot descent, the skiers exited onto the far side of the ridge (arrow), then swung around the base of the buttress to descend along the Peters Glacier.



Nearing Wonder Lake, with the north face of Denali a long, long way in the distance.

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